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NEWS

Israel bans Richardson foundation Muslim group denies ties to Hamas militants

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The Israeli government has outlawed a Muslim charity based in Richardson, contending that it has supplied financial aid to the militant Palestinian movement Hamas.

The decree, issued last month, authorizes the Israeli government to seize the assets of the **Holy Land Foundation** for Relief and Development and any of its money found in the Jewish state.

A copy of the decree was provided to The Dallas Morning News by the Israeli Foreign Ministry, along with a statement that said the order stemmed from a determination that **Holy Land Foundation** and three other Islamic organizations "have become part of the communications and economic infrastructure of Hamas."

Shukri AbuBakr, executive director of the **Holy Land Foundation**, denied any affiliation with Hamas. He said the Israeli decree was politically motivated and would not affect his organization.

"When they accuse the foundation of supporting Palestinians, they cause the masses to endorse the foundation, because they know we are doing something good for the Palestinians," Mr. AbuBakr said Friday.

Because the decree applies only to the state of **Israel**, he said, it does not apply to the Occupied West Bank or any territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority, where **Holy Land Foundation** does its work.

"There is no legal basis," Mr. AbuBakr said.

Two Israeli experts split on the decree's scope. One said it would apply only in the Occupied Territories; the other said it would affect both the territories and **Israel**.

U.S. State Department officials said they knew about the Israeli decree but could not comment on whether the government might take any action in this country against **Holy Land Foundation**.

Larry Silverman, a State Department spokesman, said the Treasury Department investigated **Holy Land Foundation** two years ago and decided against placing it on a list of terrorist organizations.

Such a designation, under a counterterrorism law enacted last year, could lead to criminal penalties and confiscation of all assets.

An updated list of terrorist organizations is expected to be released later this year. Another State Department spokesman, Joe Reap, said the list would contain only foreign terrorist groups.

Mr. AbuBakr said **Holy Land Foundation** was abiding by all U.S. laws and had a good relationship with the Clinton administration, despite pressure from **Israel** to close down Palestinian charities.

The Israeli declaration was issued May 6 by Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai. It was first reported publicly

two weeks later by Ha'aretz, a leading Israeli newspaper.

Israeli officials in Washington and **Israel** declined to offer any additional comment on the decree or what prompted it.

The order comes at a time of growing Israeli tension with Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement established in 1987 and outlawed two years later because of the alleged security threat it posed.

The decree represents the first time the Israeli government has attempted to cut off the funding from international sources that helps finance Hamas' extensive social service network in **Israel** and its territories.

Tax records and **Holy Land Foundation** officials have stated that the nonprofit foundation collects and disburses approximately \$2 million in aid annually throughout the Islamic world and United States.

Also included in the new Israeli decree were two Islamic charities based in Great Britain and France and a publication in London.

The other organizations are the Filistina Al Muslima publication and the Palestine Relief and Development Fund, both in England; and The Committee for Help and Solidarity With Palestine, based in France.

In addition to describing the four organizations as part of the Hamas network, the statement included a supporting quotation from Aharon Barak, chief justice of the Israeli Supreme Court.

Justice Barak said the four organizations were "involved in providing massive support to the families of Hamas activists who have carried out or have planned to carry out serious attacks and who were imprisoned, killed or deported."

The decree comes five years after Israeli security forces first accused **Holy Land Foundation** of being a major conduit of money from the United States to Hamas representatives in the Occupied Territories.

Holy Land Foundation was established in California in 1987 as an outgrowth of the Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It changed its name in 1989 and three years later moved to Richardson.

Mr. AbuBakr, a co-founder, said that the foundation is the largest American Muslim charity and that makes it a natural target for Israeli efforts to curb economic aid to Palestinians.

While he denied any connection to Hamas, he said the foundation assists families of Palestinians jailed, killed or deported by what he called the "racist" Israeli regime.

"We do not support terrorism, but we are supporting victims of terrorism," he said.

The foundation once provided relief assistance to Palestinians inside **Israel**, he said, but now focuses its humanitarian efforts on refugees living outside the Jewish state.

Last year, following a string of terrorist bombings blamed on Hamas, Israeli defense forces closed an office in East Jerusalem operated by a Muslim cleric who received funds from **Holy Land Foundation**.

Mr. AbuBakr said his foundation has no office in **Israel** or the West Bank. Money is distributed through other Islamic charities, some of which have similar names, he said.

He said the Palestinian Authority, which controls Gaza and some West Bank cities, supports the foundation's work.

"We are cooperating together in a lot of help and relief projects, and we are doing very fine, very good," he said.

Special contributor Emily Hauser in Tel Aviv contributed to this report.

PHOTO(S): (The Dallas Morning News: file photo) Officials of the Muslim charity **Holy Land Foundation** for Relief and Development, based in Richardson, have stated that the nonprofit foundation disburses about \$2 million in aid annually throughout the Islamic world and United States. **Israel** has ordered the seizure of any of the group's money found in the Jewish state.

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